

LYMNOCRYPTES GALLINULA.

Jack Snipe.

Scolopax Gallinula, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 244.

Gallinago minima, Ray, Syn., 105. A 3.

——— *minor*, Briss. Orn., tom. v. p. 303, pl. 26. fig. 2.

——— *gallinula*, Bonap. Geogr. and Comp. List of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 52.

Lymnocyptes gallinula, Kaup.

Philolimnos gallinula, *stagnatilis*, et *minor*, Brehm, Handb. der Naturg. aller Vög. Deutschl., pp. 623, 624.

To the sportsman this little Snipe is ever an object of interest; for it seldom rises from the marsh without attracting his immediate attention. The Pheasant is permitted to wait his convenience, or the Partridge is given the chance of escape until the little Jack is again flushed from the bed of flags into which he has just dropped. Why is it that so small an object (for its weight is not more than two ounces) commands so much anxious regard? For the simple reasons that it is a migrant, that it is second to no bird for the table, and that it is somewhat difficult to shoot. The Jack Snipe exhibits many peculiarities, and differs considerably from its allies, both in its form and in its mode of life. It is more secluded in its habits, is less easily raised from the ground, and seems to depend for safety more on the harmony of its colouring with that of the surrounding herbage than on its powers of flight. When it does take wing, it usually settles again within a hundred yards, and never mounts and circles in the air like the common species, from which it also differs in never uttering the well-known *scape-scape*. It sometimes lies so close as to admit of its being trodden upon; and when the sportsman goes quickly to the place in which he has marked his bird, it cannot be seen, despite the most searching scrutiny—the bird all the while being perchance at his heel, or half covered with the leaf of a flag or some other plant with which its plumage blends in colour. How beautiful are its iridescent tints! what lovely hues of purple, green, and buff! how harmoniously are they arranged! If an artist wish to see them in perfection, he must accompany the sportsman to the field or the morass; for they fade as the life of the bird ebbs away.

I have stated that the Jack Snipe is a migrant; for it is only in autumn, winter, and the early part of spring that it is with us. In the summer it departs to breed in northern lands, mostly to those parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia which lie within the arctic circle. In England, Scotland, and Ireland I have received no reliable information of its having bred, though we now and then find solitary birds in summer. The numbers which are frequently seen late in the spring are only apt to mislead the observer; they all quit this country before the beginning of June, which is soon enough to enable them to arrive at their breeding-quarters by the time the snows have melted. Mr. Smither, who lives on one of the great heaths near Farnham in Surrey, wrote me, on the 9th of May 1861, "We have many Jack Snipe with us at present, and I have great hopes some will stop and nest;" but as I never heard that they did so, I conclude that the flight soon after departed to countries more to their liking. Why they should not find a congenial summer home, as they do a winter one, around the great ponds of Frenchem and the soppy depressions overrun with flags and herbage of the extensive moors in that neighbourhood, I am unable to say. The Common Snipe breeds there; and why the Jack Snipe does not I cannot tell my readers, any more than I can say why some of the tens of thousands of Bramblings, which are now (March 25, 1865) to be seen at Stoke, Cliveden, and Dropmore, in Buckinghamshire, do not, like the Chaffinch, stay and breed with us. It is the habit of this little Snipe to go to the extensive morasses of Lapland for this purpose; but as certain as he goes, it is equally certain that he will return. In August a few may again be seen, in September more; in October, at the full of the moon, great flights will arrive and take possession of all suitable situations in the British Islands, and will there remain if not dispersed or killed. To give an account of the "great bags" of this bird that have been shot in a day would answer no purpose; but when we remember the wholesale slaughter that annually takes place in England and nearly every part of Ireland, it is evident that its numbers must be doubled or trebled every year in some countries unknown to us, or it would long since have been extinct.

There is but little external difference in the appearance of the sexes, one style of plumage being common to both. When the bird arrives in autumn, it is generally clean-moulted and in very fine trim; some have very beautiful purple rumps, while in others the same part is mottled brown. I at one time thought that these were sexual distinctions; but I have not been able to satisfy myself that they are so, though I am certain that some of the birds with purple rumps are females. This variation in the colouring requires more attention from ornithologists than I have been able to give to it. It is just possible that the mottled-brown colouring of the rump may be a characteristic of the young birds of the year.